

13
17.VII.2
CIRCULAR LETTER.

THE
ELDERS AND MESSENGERS
OF THE SEVERAL
BAPTIST CHURCHES,

MEETING FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AT

BEWDLEY,
BIRMINGHAM,
Cannon-Street, and
Bond-Street,
BRITTLE-LANE,

BROMSGROVE,
COSELEY,
CRADELEY,
EVESHAM,
KIDDERMINSTER, WORCESTER;
AND
UPTON,

BILSTONE,
BROAD-OAK,
COLEFORD,

COPPICE,
EASTCOMBS,
LEOMINSTER,

Having also received *LETTERS from*.....19.....

RYEFORD,

AND

WILLENHALL,
WOLVERHAMPTON, W.C. 1

BEING MET IN

ASSOCIATION AT BROMSGROVE,

June 4th and 5th, 1811;

Maintaining the Independence of their respective Churches;—and firmly believing the Important Doctrines of Three Equal Persons in the Godhead;—Eternal and Personal Election;—Original Sin;—Particular Redemption;—Free Justification by the Righteousness of Christ imputed;—Efficacious Grace in Regeneration;—the Final Perseverance of the Saints;—the Resurrection of the Dead;—the General Judgment at the Last Day;—and the Life Everlasting;

TO THE

SEVERAL SOCIETIES THEY REPRESENT.

DEAR BRETHREN,

YOUR welfare lies near our hearts. “We live if you stand fast,” “we long after you all in the Lord,” “we seek not yours but you,” are expressions, which we trust we can appropriate as our own. When we hear that you live in harmony and peace, bear one another’s burdens, grow in benevolence, humility, zeal, prayer and watchfulness, and increase in numbers with such who shall be saved, we shed the tear of joy, and call upon all that is within us to bless God for the glad tidings. But when on the other hand we hear of dissensions, lukewarmness and indifference to the means of grace, and of some turning again to folly amongst you, we cannot forbear retiring into our closets to express before God the pungent sorrow we feel, and to implore on your behalf recovering grace.

So important in our estimation is your individual and collective peace and prosperity, that in obedience to our Master’s call we gladly devote our time and talents to promote them, and think ourselves well rewarded if our Lord approves and succeeds us, though at the expense

of our worldly interest, reputation amongst men, bodily ease and health. Did we know what subject would be most interesting and useful to you, that subject should fill the pages of our annual epistle; but though ignorant of this, we trust we have chosen one that will not be uninteresting or in vain in the Lord, since it is a subject of great importance, of universal concern, and (if properly attended to) of private and public utility. We propose to address you on "The nature and advantages of self-denial." If Christ has any authority in the church, and professors owe him any obedience, self-denial must be a duty, unless it can be proved that the benefits Christ bestows destroy all moral obligation, and give believers a licence to indulge the desires of the flesh and the mind. But can it be supposed that because he did his Father's will and was obedient unto death, and rose again for our justification, that this entitles us to break his holy laws and grieve his Spirit, without shame or fear of punishment? If a man acts upon this principle towards his benefactor in common life, he will justly be considered as one of the vilest of the vile. Nor can it be said with greater propriety, that though self-denial is a duty there is no need to explain its nature or enforce its observance, because where the grace of God is implanted and his Spirit dwells, the mind will infallibly be led to know and disposed to do the will of God without ministerial aid. If it be right to act upon this principle, Christ, his Apostles, and ministers have uniformly acted upon a wrong one, and given themselves a great deal of unnecessary trouble. But we trust insinuations of this kind will ever be treated by you with all the abhorrence they merit. Nothing can be more plain than that God hath in his works of providence and redemption connected means and end, duty and privilege together; and all the attempts of man to separate them must ultimately terminate in shame and confusion of face; for he hath done all things well, so well, that vain man by attempting to alter them deranges the beautiful symmetry of the divine plan of salvation, and as far as in him lies, robs God of the glory of the noblest scheme ever beheld in the universe. But we proceed 1.) to consider the *nature* of self-denial. The man that lays no restraint upon his disorderly passions and appetites, but makes "provision for the flesh to fulfil the desires of the flesh and the mind," is no disciple of Christ; for he hath said, "whosoever will be my disciple let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." So in the Old and New Testament we are taught by precept and example to deny ourselves "all ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world."

What is the nature of that self-denial our Lord commands and we recommend? Is it a blind submission to all the heavy burdens which superstition has imposed on its votaries? No, Christianity does not so degrade man; it imposes no more than reason ought to approve. The self-denial we recommend consists in a cheerful submission to the authority of the great Head of the church, imitating his holy example, and becoming "followers of those who through faith and patience now inherit the promises;" who denied themselves whatever opposed the authority of Christ. Reason must always accede to the justness of that appeal, "we ought to obey God rather than men." When we are tempted to dishonour God and injure our own souls by the commission of any moral evil, how rational the exclamation, "how can

"I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" How consistent with reason that those passions and appetites by which man has so much degraded himself, injured his fellow men, and dishonoured God, should be controlled, and that our personal ease and private interest should be cheerfully given up when the honour of God and the public good call for it.

Christ required of his immediate followers that they should "forsake all and follow him;" they never disputed his right to command, but rendered to him the most cheerful submission, and counted not their lives dear to them, but held themselves in readiness to be offered up at his pleasure, nor could any allurements or terrors of men move them from their purpose: no self-denial appeared too great, for they conferred not with flesh and blood. They made no account of any thing compared with the obedience they owed to Christ; and though the self-denial to which we are called at the present period is not like theirs, we should keep in mind that the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ is not diminished; "My Son, give me thy heart," is still his claim; and the same divine principles that influenced their heroic actions should influence us to deny ourselves "the pleasures of sin which are but for a season."

The self-denial to which we are called is not that which the covetous man inflicts upon himself, (who will hardly allow himself the necessities of life that he may accumulate riches,) but that which benevolence and love dictate: the follower of Christ may eat and drink with moderation the bounties which God provides for him, for he gives us all things richly to be enjoyed. But he is not allowed to live to himself, nor care only for his own things. This is enforced by precept and example: the self-denial practised by those our Lord commends was of this sort; "I was a stranger and ye took me in; I was hungry and ye fed me; I was sick and in prison and ye visited me;" these persons are justly commended and rewarded for denying themselves the pleasures which men derive from ease, reputation, and possession of property which they with difficulty have obtained, for the gratification of lending their aid to the necessitous. Upon this principle we are forbidden to gratify a revengeful disposition; "Vengeance is mine, I will repay it, saith the Lord;" "if thine enemy hunger, feed him;" "bless them that curse you, pray for them who despitefully use you." It was from this benevolence of mind the Apostle declared he would "not eat meat while the world stood," if it should make his brother offend. He became "all things to all men that he might gain some," and denied himself any lawful enjoyment rather than hurt a weak brother. And sacrifices of this kind are still due to our brethren in Christ. So the friends of Christ should deny themselves luxuries, that they may be just to all men, and that they may be generous; or how will it be possible to give up their account with joy as good stewards? Let us not love in word only but in deed, like the good Samaritan, who humbled himself, and went to the man who was half dead, and dressed his wounds, set him on his own beast, and took him to an inn and gave charge that care should be taken of him at his own expence.

The self-denial our Lord commands is a voluntary act, performed in the fear and to the glory of God. This was the case with Moses, when he preferred suffering with the people of God to the enjoyment of the pleasures of sin which are but for a season. The riches and pleasures

which Egypt could furnish, formed a wonderful contrast with the reproach of Christ and suffering with the people of God; yet the latter was preferred without any force upon his will, or violence to his reason. This remarkable act of self-denial was not done in an ostentatious manner, to gain the admiration of the present and succeeding ages, like the donations, prayers, and fastings of those "who loved the praises of men more than the praise of God." Self-denial was practised by both, but the one was exceedingly offensive, the other an offering pleasant unto the Lord. A servant of Christ denies himself all ungodliness and worldly lusts, because he inwardly and devoutly hates every false way, but loves the law of God: hence it is he flees from the appearance of evil that it may not grieve him; so that he is not forced into acts of self-denial by coercive measures, as the slave is driven to his task, for his language is "thy servant feareth the Lord;" and that fear is more efficacious than the scourge. So when Zaccheus felt the grace of God indeed, he began his religious course with self-denial; he laid aside "every weight and the sin that most easily beset him," he could no more taste the sweets of extortion, but freely proposed to make restitution to the injured, and distribution to the poor; "old things passed away and all things became new:" it was a new thing for this man to deny himself, and to satisfy the just claims of others; it was "the Lord's doings and marvellous" to all around: God hath given us general rules, and it is the business of a good man to apply them to those particular cases to which they are applicable. Every instance of self-denial to which you may be called could not be specified; there is a vast variety of ways in which we may do good, numerous instances in which our own inclination must be opposed, and our worldly interest given up, (in all of which self-denial must be practised;) and the man who has no disposition to do good, nor to sacrifice his own interest and gratification for the honour and glory of God, has no just claim to the character of a christian.

In the self-denial of a disciple of Christ, there is something so admirably disinterested, that it forms a striking contrast to the pretended humiliations of those men who make a gain of godliness, whose religion is a trade by which they seek honour and worldly emolument. The object of such persons is to ingratiate themselves into the good opinion of their neighbours; hence if they fast, they must disfigure themselves; if they give to the poor, they must sound a trumpet; if they pray, it must be in the corners of the streets; if they deliver public orations, it must be to please men. Of this sort were the courtly false prophets, scribes, and pharisees of old, and too many now are just of the same mind: take away these men's gain and there is an end to their religion; they live and act as if religion were a farce and there were no God, rewards, nor punishments. Their gaudy religion and the patronage they obtain make them proud and fearless of God and man: but the follower of Christ lives and acts as a citizen of another community, he views himself a pilgrim and stranger, seeks another and better country, his treasure and affections are in heaven, and his chief care is to please his Lord and Master. "Blessed is that servant whom his Lord when he cometh shall find so doing." A disciple of Christ does not forget he is a man and has an interest in this world, but his religion is of too great importance to be made a mere tool to promote it; on the contrary he has often been called to sacrifice all as a man,

for Christ's sake, without any prospect of obtaining any thing in return from men but hatred, poverty, reproach, calumny, and persecution. Yet when the call is plain his reply is, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear to me, that I may win Christ." So when he does good it is often to those who can never repay him; it is to the poor, the halt, or blind, or perhaps to those who will repay him evil for good, yet he cheerfully does good for Christ's sake and for the sake of the good itself, and does not let "his left hand know what his right hand doeth:" so when he humbles himself it is in the sight of God; when he prays it is to his Father (and often) in secret; if he suffers it is not as an evil doer, but for righteousness sake. and whether he gratifies or denies himself it is done to the glory of God.

Finally, dear brethren, (upon this part of the subject,) we beseech you for Christ's sake that ye prove all things and hold fast that which is good; be not conformed to this world in its principles, extravagances, dispositions, tempers, intemperance, amusements, or neglect of divine things; "but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds: be ye followers of God as dear children, denying yourselves all ungodliness and worldly lusts, and live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world." Remember, to deny yourselves in these things is what even reason dictates and good will to men requires; of course it should be done without constraint, as a matter of choice, without any selfish principle. But we proposed to consider,

Secondly, The advantages of self-denial. Though a disciple of Christ does not act merely with a view to his own advantage present or future, but from a more generous principle of love to Christ and his fellow men, and perhaps in many of his best actions he has no thought of any advantage resulting therefrom to himself; yet that "every man shall be rewarded according to his works whether they be good or bad," is a truth we ought to believe as firmly as our own existence. But the advantages of self-denial are not confined to the individual who performs the important duty; they extend to others also.

It may be shown that the self-denying christian is a useful character; the world is benefitted by him, nor can it long exist without him. "Ye are the salt of the earth," "ye are the light of the world," are expressions that prove our assertion. But if a man making a profession of religion is as proud, extravagant, intemperate, and selfish as other men, it is plain that man will do much harm, for his conduct will give the world a wrong idea of religion, and cause them to think worse of others and better of themselves than they ought; let therefore your conduct and conversation be as becometh the gospel of Christ, that you may thereby correct these errors. The self-denying conduct of a good man will have a tendency to enable him to do good unto all men by promoting peace amongst them, alleviating their distresses, supplying their wants, and restraining their vices; "let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works." Those who profess to be the disciples of Christ, but do not deny themselves worldly lusts except in a very partial manner, form a sort of middle class in society, that are unfit to be closely united with either the world or the church, and are more miserable and injurious than either. But the man who denies himself, takes up his cross, and follows Christ, is useful in a family and neighbourhood, at a fast or a feast, in a cottage or a palace, as a private or public character, in the army or navy, to

friends and enemies, to princes and peasants, to the Hindoo and African, to the freeman and slave; for the language and conduct of such a man form an overwhelming eloquence that enlightens and reforms the most ignorant and dissolute. There is something so wonderfully grand and beautiful in the self-denying religion of Christ, that when it is exhibited in its native simplicity and graces by those who possess it, they may be said to be all glorious within, and their garments of wrought gold excite the admiration and reverence of the beholder; and whilst a number of such characters exist, some will be brought out of darkness into marvellous light, the moral state of society will be improved, and the blessings of providence not so much abused, nor the means of information so confined, as would be the case if they did not. One advantage therefore resulting from self-denial upon gospel principles, and to the extent duty calls, is, that the men of the world are materially benefitted thereby.

Another advantage that we might point out is, that the church of Christ is benefitted by such conduct. Every member of a church ought to consider, how he may promote the interest of that society to which he belongs, for without care and self-denial a prosperous interest may soon be ruined. The fruits of many years labour may be scattered and spoiled by one dreadful storm. Such self-denying characters as we have described make the church to which they belong respectable, for no law nor tongue can justly condemn them; "they are more excellent than their neighbour." They cannot be inactive in a church, but are "diligent in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord:" like those good women who were early at the sepulchre, they are early and constant at the house of God, cheerfully denying themselves those indulgences which keep too many from public worship, to the grief of their minister, their own loss, and contamination of their connections; but a few such veterans in the army of Christ are more formidable to an enemy than a huge host of undisciplined professors. The character we have been describing cannot rest if Zion be in ruins, but must labour incessantly to repair them; he goes about like his Lord to do good to the ignorant, to those enquiring "the way to Zion with their faces thitherward," to those who are cast down, afflicted, and in want, to rouse the careless and indolent, and restore the fallen. The state of a religious society will be improved in proportion a self-denial is practised; let that be dispensed with, and the state of religion will soon resemble an ancient building that is going fast to ruin, or an uncultivated garden that produces nothing but noxious weeds. If a member of a church becomes carnal and satiates himself with the pleasures of the world, and becomes proud and self-willed, revenges all opposition, treats his brethren with contempt, and neglects the means of grace; he then becomes dangerous to that society, as the accursed thing to Israel, or a mortified limb to the human body. But those characters who "deny themselves and take up the cross and follow Christ," honour God thereby, and God also honours them by making their example, prayers, advice and efforts, eminently serviceable in promoting the interest of religion; so that they become the pillars and ornaments of the house of God who are most distinguished by this grace.

Dear brethren, let us hope that the prospect of being serviceable to a lost and miserable world and to the church of God, will stimulate

you cheerfully to deny yourselves in every instance that may be for their advantage.

But your own interest will be promoted by self-denial. It will promote your own good, independently of its effects upon others. Happiness is of vast importance to man. Riches, honours, sumptuous fare and gaudy apparel, the applauses of numerous friends, various scenes, and carnal gratifications, are wretched substitutes for inward peace and joy; as useless as the pompous funeral and splendid tomb to the dead: but self-denial is the path wisdom points out, and "her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace." That the happiness enjoyed in following the self-denying commands and example of Christ more than compensates for every sacrifice that can be made, is demonstrable from reason, revelation, and experience. Those who give to the poor, forsake "father and mother, sister and brother, house and land, and lose their own lives for Christ's sake," shall not only be indemnified, but be repaid with immense interest, more than can be hoped for by retaining them.

So the peace-makers and merciful are more happy than those who will make no sacrifices for the relief of the miserable, the preservation or restoration of peace where it is endangered or lost: so they have more cause for joy who are persecuted for righteousness sake, than they have who persecute. Abraham was more happy in having given up a natural right to Lot, when it became necessary for them to part, than if he had strenuously insisted upon making the choice himself. This noble act of self-denial, made to preserve peace and brotherly love, terminated as most acts of this sort have done, to the advantage of him who makes the sacrifice. So the solemn duties of religion are in general a pleasure or a task, according as the mind is under the influence of sensual enjoyments or self-denial. The former produces hardness of heart, blindness in the understanding, backwardness and shame, especially with respect to the more private duties of prayer, reading, self-examination, and christian conversation: but self-denial has the contrary effect, and produces a gust for those duties. They, like his meat and drink, are palatable and refreshing to himself and savory to others. Those who deny themselves, give to others, and enjoy themselves, the best evidence of their calling and election of God, of their right through grace to all the blessings of the new covenant. They are "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

Those persons who excel in the exercise of self-denial, gain an unassumed and natural pre-eminence over their brethren that none can justly dispute or take from them, are entitled to their love and confidence, and to the most honourable and useful offices. Such characters will be the temples of the Holy Ghost, who will take of the things of God and show to them; and the secret of the Lord will be with them, and he will show them his covenant; like trees planted by rivers of water, their leaf shall be green, and they will bring forth fruit in season; being planted in the house of our God they will flourish in his courts. Finally, such a character enjoying such advantages has nothing that ought to alarm or terrify him; no, neither men nor devils, poverty nor sickness, death nor judgment to come, for all must eventually work together for his good: "fear not therefore, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Dear brethren, you see self-denial is not confined to a few persons in the family of Christ, nor to a few extraordinary occasions; nor is it a formal ceremony that must be kept up in a periodical manner, but begins with real religion, and cannot be dispensed with in the present state. You cannot preserve a conscience void of offence, a character unblemished, forbear to do injury, or do good, but some sacrifices must be made. But do any object to the doctrine of self-denial, on the ground that as salvation is of grace, it is therefore unnecessary to oppose our own inclination and forego our own interest; and that all we have to do is firmly to believe we shall be saved? If men's inclinations were to be the standard rule of right and wrong, and reason and the Bible were to be given up, the most awful consequences would follow; ought we to believe we are the children of God and heirs of salvation without the fruits of salvation? To believe a thing without evidence constitutes folly and presumption; but we trust "ye have not so learned Christ; but now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness and the end everlasting life." Remember, dear brethren, that Christ hath left us an example that we should tread in his steps. His whole life was an exhibition of disinterested benevolence and self-denial. It is expressly said that "he pleased not himself." No; he sought not his own will, but the will of him that sent him. His birth, his life, his death, were not for himself, but devoted to his friends and followers. You are called Christians from the supposition that you have imbibed the spirit of Christ. Therefore "be ye followers of him as dear children." In this course Christ will indemnify you for all your trouble and expence. "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."—To the disinterested and self-denying, he will say in the day of Judgment, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Signed by the Moderator,

JOHN SCROXTON.

BREVIATES.

WEDNESDAY afternoon, met at three o'clock. Brother Scroxton read the Circular Letter. Met again at six in the evening, Brother Scroxton introduced the service by prayer; the letters from the Churches were read, and Brother Davis concluded with prayer.

THURSDAY morning, at six o'clock assembled for prayer, Brethren Brooks, Wassal, Wilkes, Price, Davis, Muckley, and Trotman were engaged in leading the devotion of the worshippers. At half past ten, the public services were introduced with reading the scriptures and prayer by Brother Griffin: Brother Belsher preached from Gal. ii. 20. *Christ liveth in me*—and Brother Butterworth, from John ix. 27. *Will ye also be his disciples?* And Brother Davis concluded with prayer. In the evening at six o'clock, Brother Smith introduced the service by prayer; Brother Draper preached from John iii. 16. *God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in*